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# The Klaus Barbie report: Candid but embarrassing

Klaus Barbie, the "butcher of Lyon," was the only accused Nazi war criminal helped by American intelligence agents to escape prosecution, the Justice Department stated in its detailed report on U.S. involvement with the former Gestapo officer.

That and the reasons that Army intelligence officers arranged for Barbie to escape to Bolivia in 1951 via a secret route known as the "rat line" offer some mitigation — but not much — for what will go down in history as a matter of deep embarrassment to the U.S. government and the American people.

In its report, the Justice Department officially admitted that the Army's Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) had hired Barbie as an anti-Communist informant and had protected him from prosecution on charges that he deported and massacred thousands of French Jews and resistance fighters during the German occupation of France.

Attorney General William French Smith last March ordered an investigation after Barbie was expelled by Bolivia and taken to France to stand trial on charges of committing "crimes against humanity" as chief of the Gestapo in Lyon from 1942 to 1944.

When the French in 1949 sought information about Barbie's whereabouts, a half-dozen high-ranking CIC officers, including the late Brig. Gen. Robert Taylor, director of intelligence for the U.S. Army in Europe, "knowingly misled the U.S. High Commissioner's Office for Germany and the State Department and lied openly to the State Department at least twice that they no longer employed Barbie or even knew where he was," the Justice Department said. Then, as the cover-up deepened, the CIC paid to have Barbie and

his family smuggled out of Europe to Bolivia where he lived and traveled twice to the United States as a free man for 33 years.

Why did that happen?

The Justice Department said that, through a network of informers run by Barbie, the CIC had received information about postwar cooperation between French and Soviet intelligence, Soviet attempts to penetrate German political groups and the whereabouts and activities of hundreds of former Gestapo officers who could be used as informers. Fearing that Barbie in French hands would reveal information that would compromise Army intelligence procedures and informants, the CIC officers felt they could not afford to hand him over, the report asserted.

The cloak-and-dagger atmosphere that prevailed among intelligence services in the turbulent cold-war period after World War II can provide some rationalization for the Army's action, but it is small comfort now that it has been established that a handful of American officers took a matter of such importance in their own hands, lied to their superiors and obstructed justice.

The United States has formally apologized to France, and that is as it should be. Barbie is in jail and will answer for his Gestapo activities before a French court. But despite the Justice Department's forthright, detailed facing up to the truth, the stain of U.S. collaboration in his escape will not wash away. The damage done by having protected a man of his ilk is far, far greater than any that might have been sustained to U.S. intelligence work had the Army done the right thing so many years ago.